



ELLSWORTH KELLY

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2012

Oil on canvas, two joined panels

70 x 58 inches

178 x 147 cm



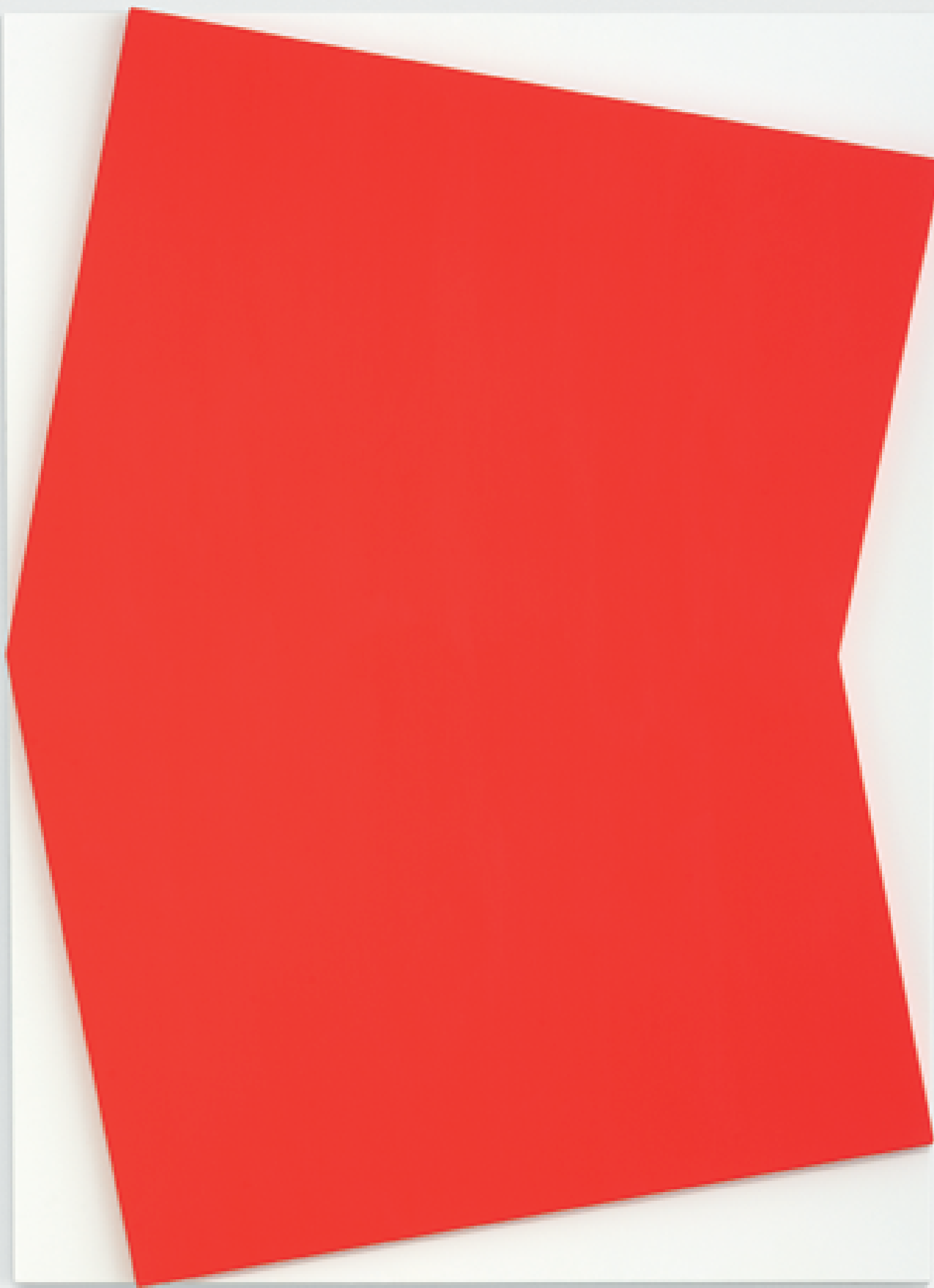
*Red Relief Over White*

2012

Oil on canvas, two joined panels

70 x 51 ¼ inches

178 x 130 cm



*Black Relief Over White III*  
2012  
Oil on canvas, two joined panels  
72 x 42 inches  
183 x 107 cm





Foldout:

*Curves on White (Four Panels)*

2011

Oil on canvas, four paintings, each  
comprised of two joined panels

*Red Curve on White*

70 x 54¼ inches

178 x 138 cm

*Blue Curve on White*

60 x 60 inches

152 x 152 cm

*Yellow Curve on White*

70 x 44¼ inches

178 x 112 cm

*Green Curve on White*

60 x 60 inches

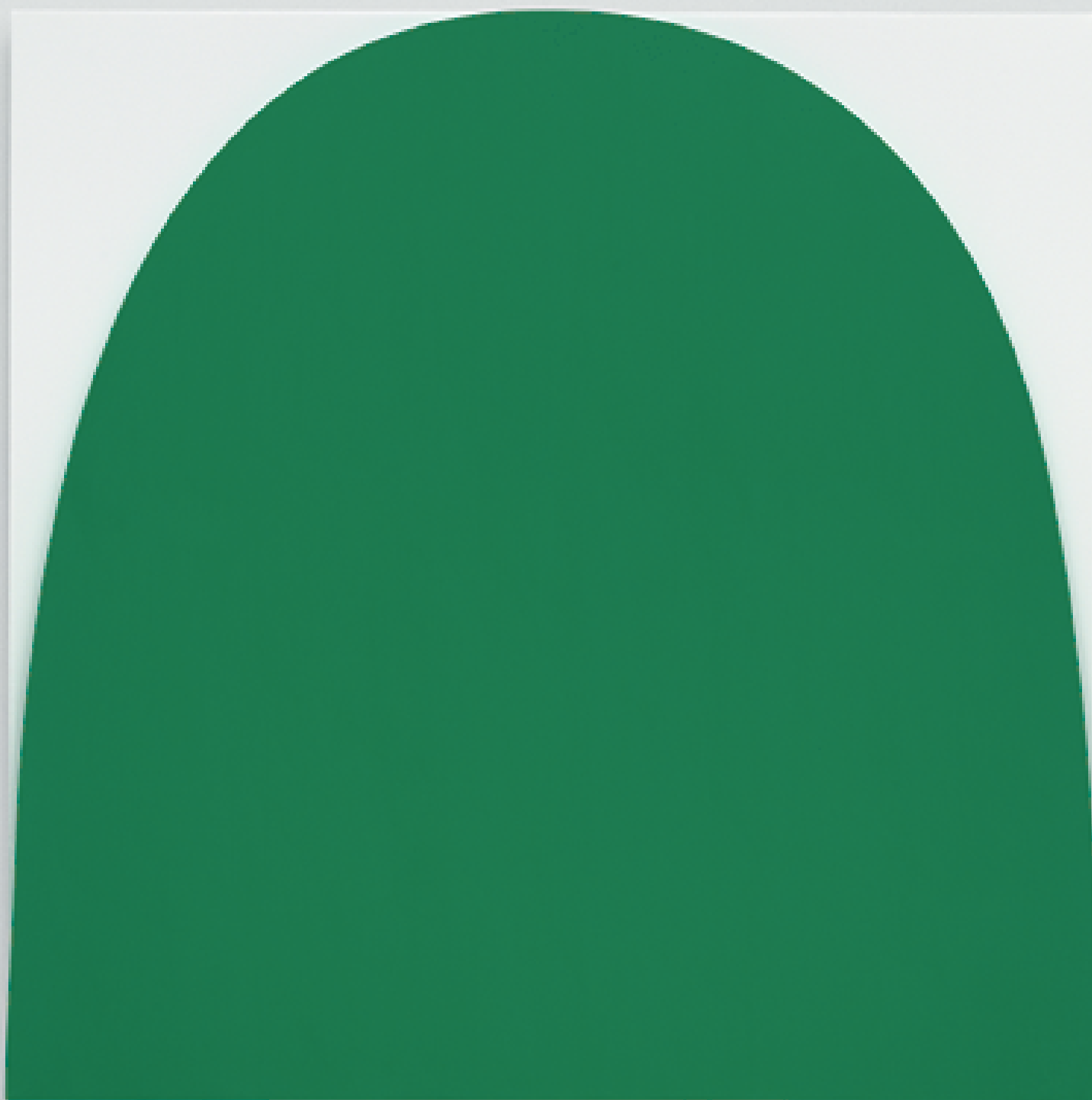
152 x 152 cm











*Curves on White (Four Panels)* (2011) is a work composed of four bipartite elements. Each consists of two panels painted in oil on canvas and completely joined — more precisely, superimposed — so as to create an object that presents, above all, an appearance of unity. Together these elements comprise four “reliefs,” to use the standard term for works of this type by Ellsworth Kelly. The word “relief” contains a certain paradox, here felt more palpably than ever, given that Kelly’s thought and his artistic endeavors are fundamentally grounded in painting. The work is indeed a relief, however, and it must be emphasized that for a long time now Kelly has attempted to introduce into his painting a sort of literal push and pull. In some instances this is achieved by positioning certain parts of the plane farther forward with respect to the other elements. Without going back too far in time, this relationship can be seen in *Méditerranée* (1952), for example, where the effect of depth difference is immediately more perceptible because there are only two parts, as well as in *Yellow Relief* (1954–55) or *Orange Red Relief* (1959). Alternatively, the effect may be achieved by superimposition, as Kelly has demonstrated over the last few years. In any case, the principle of relief never involves more than two distinct planes.<sup>1</sup>

Within the simultaneous tetralogy of *Curves on White*, one easily distinguishes two sub-groups, two pairs in alternating positions: on the one hand, *Red Curve on White* and *Yellow Curve on White*, both vertical rectangles of equal height but differing widths; on the other, *Blue Curve on White* and *Green Curve on White*, both squares of comparatively less height but greater width. In the first pair the difference in width is ten inches, with *Yellow Curve on White* the narrower of the two. Furthermore, this difference in width is equal to the difference in height between the first pair (70 inches) and the second pair (60 inches). This factor contributes to the chiasmic character of the overall sequence. Each relief confronts us with a form that is oblong and monochromatic (perhaps reminiscent of a tongue or the tip of a finger, for those who are inclined to interpret them in a schematic or allegorical way). Each form is set upon something that our eye spontaneously perceives as a white underlying quadrilateral. In the case of *Blue Curve* and *Green Curve* this perception is subliminal, since only three of their sides are visible. In the red/yellow pair this form suggests an ascending movement toward the right, more marked in the yellow panel than in the red. In the blue/green pair the aforesaid “curve” (symmetrically structured along the vertical axis, unlike those of the preceding pair) is identical but reversed. The blue/white and green/white surfaces stand in the same relationship of proportion and aspect. As for the red/white and yellow/white surfaces, I am inclined to think that they are connected by some sort of quantifiable relationship, although they are of differing aspects.



*Orange Green*  
1964  
Oil on canvas  
67 x 50 inches  
170 x 127 cm  
Private collection

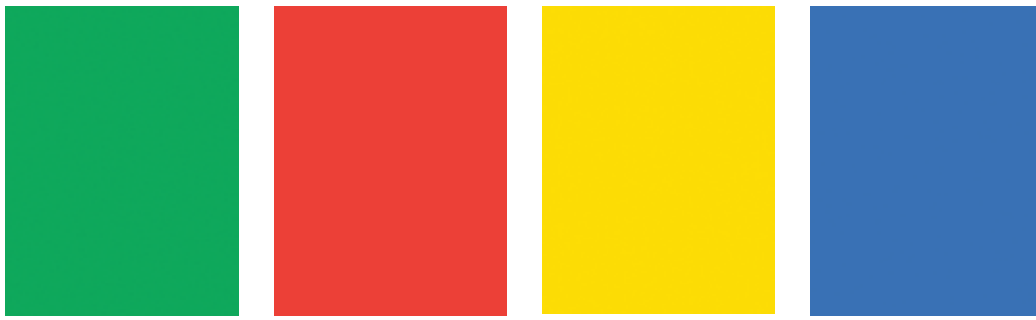


This interplay of differences and similarities weaves a work of powerful internal unity. The dynamic compactness of *Curves on White* is equally assured in its color register; the order of succession chosen for the three primary colors ensures that, in the second and third elements, the blue and the yellow generate by virtual addition the green curve of the fourth element. This fourth element refers back to the first element as being complementary to the red, while throughout this looped arrangement (or, rather, a figure-eight arrangement) the color white functions literally and figuratively as a sort of *basso continuo*. The use of the color white will disturb, or at least render more complex, one of Kelly's favorite ideas — that of transferring to the wall the function of the background. *Curves on White* is likely to be presented on a white wall, yet the effect of the wall is weakened in terms of serving as an absolute background. Every element exercises an attraction that draws the wall toward the interior of the work and fosters a relationship with it. This bond tends to minimize differentiation, creating around each of the curves a zone of uncertainty that varies according to the viewer's vantage. The fact is that Kelly's aesthetic system, in essence an open one, is derived chiefly from the deviations from his own rules that he practices over the course of time. As he declared in 1991, "My later paintings have all the earlier paintings inside them."<sup>2</sup> By this he means that they transform the earlier ones as much as they cause them to live on. Among a multitude of other examples, see *Orange Green* (1964), which from the standpoint of morphology appears at first sight very close to what will later become *Red Curve on White* or *Yellow Curve on White*. Nevertheless, all sorts of disparities quickly appear that outweigh this familial feeling — it is a picture, not a relief; it includes two secondary colors and no white; and it is not a sequential work — all of which demonstrate the primacy of a spirit of variation.

Looking at *Curves on White*, I cannot rid myself of the feeling of being in the presence of four *individuals* gathered together by a community of interests or objectives. These are chromatic individuals in the sense that Kelly's works present themselves often as the portrait of a color or the portrait of a group of colors. Among many other instances, for example, are the four monochrome pictures of *Green Red Yellow Blue* (1965), different though they are from *Curves on White*. In this sense, looking outside of the corpus of its author (and here I am reducing apparent contrasts despite having insisted upon the necessity of subtle distinctions), *Curves on White* reminds me most particularly of a cinematographic installation, Bruce Nauman's *Art Make-Up* (1967–68). In four silent films designed to be projected upon the four walls of a single room, Nauman, at the same time actor, model, and subject/object, throws together reminiscences of Noh theater, the pink- and blue-colored bodies of the *Deposition* of Pontormo, Al Jolson, Rodchenko and — who knows? — Ellsworth Kelly, in a staged self-portrait that is also a self-painting in white, pink, green, and black.<sup>3</sup>

At this point it is impossible to avoid making clear reference to music. Let us recall, first of all, the artistic credo, formulated in his "Notes from 1969," that Kelly has maintained throughout his artistic activity: "The form of my painting is the content."<sup>4</sup> This credo coincides perfectly with the maxim of Walter Pater: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."<sup>5</sup> The reference is appropriate because *Curves*





*Green Red Yellow Blue*

1965

Acrylic on canvas

Four panels separated by 9-inch intervals

Overall: 76 x 255 inches

193 x 648 cm

Each panel: 76 x 57 in

193 x 145 cm

Private collection

*on White* is, in a certain way, a quartet based upon the triad of primary colors, augmented by a secondary color that introduces into the composition a certain amount of movement and variation. From the standpoint of structure, this might well approach what Charles Rosen has written about the string quartet, which he defines as “the natural consequence of a musical language in which expression is entirely based on dissonance to a triad.”<sup>6</sup> One might also think of those vocal quartets that are interspersed in the great classical operas. For example, the quartet from the first act of Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, “Mir ist so wunderbar,” a quartet in canon of great Mozartian charm, in which Leonore (disguised as a man and going by the name of Fidelio), Marzelline (who is in love with Fidelio), Rocco (Marzelline’s father), and Jaquino (Marzelline’s suitor) weave hopes and misunderstandings, passion and suffering, into a bouquet that I feel finds an incidental echo in the interplay of relationships underlying *Curves on White*.

The idea of an affinity between painting and music is, of course, quite venerable. Nicolas Poussin, in a letter to his friend Paul Fréart de Chantelou dated March 24, 1647, attempts to justify his various styles: “I am not one of those people who always use the same tone when they sing.” On November 24 of the same year, again writing to Chantelou, he laid out in detail his theory of the *modes* in painting, taken directly from a music treatise by Giuseppe Zarlino called the *Istitutioni harmoniche*, published in Venice in 1558. The canvas *A Dance to the Music of Time*, painted during the second half of the 1630s, is one of Poussin’s many pictures that bear the marks of such a musical conception of painting. It is also one of his most beautiful works, and the one with which I would like to conclude this brief homage to Kelly. It was also known by the title *The Dance of Human Life*. (Bellori refers to it by this title, *Il ballo della vita umana*, in his book *Vite dei pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni*, published in 1672.) Along with his *Time Saving Truth from Envy and Discord* (now lost) and *The Arcadian Shepherds*, *A Dance to the Music of Time* is one of three “moral poems” conceived by Poussin according to a subject provided by Giulio Rospigliosi. (A churchman and author of important opera libretti, Rospigliosi was elected Pope Clement IX in 1667.) In the center of the composition, a group of four female figures, each distinguished by the color of her clothing, dances a roundelay to the sound of a lyre played by Father Time, who is seated to the right. Beginning with the figure that has its back turned to us, and moving in a clockwise direction, the four figures are Poverty, Labor, Wealth, and Pleasure (the only one who looks in the direction of the viewer). They are captured

Bruce Nauman

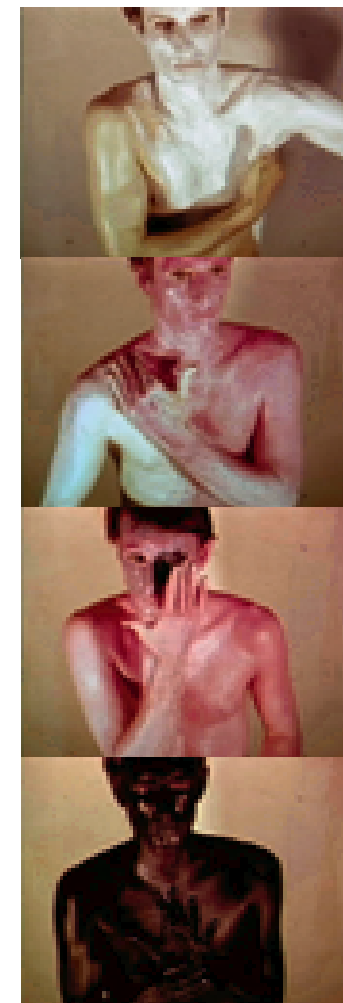
*Art Make-Up*

1967–68

16 mm film on video, color, sound

Electronic Arts Intermix,

New York





Nicolas Poussin  
*A Dance to the Music of Time*  
 ca. 1634–36  
 Oil on canvas  
 32 ½ x 41 inches  
 83 x 104 cm  
 Wallace Collection, London

in the process of endlessly trading places with each other. Two *putti* are visible, one of them blowing soap bubbles and the other playing with an hourglass. From either side they extend this meditation upon the ephemeral destiny of all persons and things.<sup>7</sup> Kelly’s work does away with — makes an abstraction of (*faire abstraction*) — this multiplicity of meanings. However, to the extent that we, confronted by the quartet of *Curves on White*, are able to summon Poussin’s wheel of fortune by our perception and our memory (the words offered in this essay seek only to propose the possibility of this sort of anamnesis), Kelly’s work will be illuminated in a way that anchors it in time and strengthens its “real meaning”<sup>8</sup> once all is said and done.

*Translated from French by Alan G. Paddle*

#### NOTES

1. On the question of the relief, see Sarah Rich, “Attention! Ellsworth Kelly’s Reliefs” in the catalogue *Ellsworth Kelly: Relief Paintings 1954–2001* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2001), 17–29. See also the words written by Kelly himself in untitled notes dated October 1983: “It was in the period from 1949 to 1954, when I lived in Paris, that I first achieved the separation of form and ground in a series of joined-panel paintings. The canvas panels were painted solid colors with no incident, lines, marks, brushstrokes, or depicted shapes; the joined panels became a form, and thereby transferred the ground from the surface of the canvas to the wall. The result was a painting whose interest was not only in itself, but also in its relation to things outside it. From the time I returned to New York in 1954 and until 1965, I made few joined-panel works. The salient feature of my paintings during that period was a large curved form that squeezed the ground to the edge of the canvas. Later, it was through the making of sculpture and cutting form out of metal that I returned to making joined-panel works on canvas in which the ground was eliminated.” From the catalogue *Ellsworth Kelly* (Los Angeles/New York: Margo Leavin Gallery/Leo Castelli Gallery), unpaginated.
2. In a conversation with Paul Taylor published in *Interview* in May 1991 and reprinted in *Artstudio* 24 (special Ellsworth Kelly issue, spring 1992), 156.
3. For a more detailed analysis of this work, I refer you to “Pour un Nauman” in my book *Un trou dans la vie: Essais sur l’art depuis 1960* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002), 170–2.
4. “Notes from 1969” in the catalogue *Ellsworth Kelly: Paintings and Sculptures 1963–1979*. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1979), 32.
5. These words, at once modernist and prophetic, which Pater calls “abstract language” in the following paragraph, are taken from his essay “The School of Giorgione,” written in 1877. With regard to our subject, let us cite it once again: “*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely, its given incidents or situation — that the mere matter of a picture, the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape — should be nothing without the form, the spirit of the handling, that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees.” See Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 86.
6. Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: Norton, 1972), 138.
7. Concerning this work, see the monograph by Richard Beresford *A Dance to the Music of Time by Nicolas Poussin* (London: The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, 1995). During a cleaning undertaken in 1975, the painting revealed a surprising piece of information. Poussin had prepared the canvas with a coat of rose-red paint, and before this coat dried Poussin covered it completely with impressions of his thumb. Afterward he painted his composition over an under layer methodically textured by thumbprints that can once again be perceived in every detail. *A Dance to the Music of Time* is also the title that Anthony Powell gave to his vast cycle of twelve novels published between 1951 and 1975.
8. Here are Kelly’s own words: “My first lesson was to see objectively, to erase all ‘meaning’ of the thing seen. Then only, could the real meaning be understood and felt.” From his “Notes from 1969,” op. cit., 34.

*Black Relief Over White II*

2012

Oil on canvas, two joined panels

70 x 51¼ inches

178 x 130 cm



*White Relief Over White*

2012

Oil on canvas and wood, two joined panels

70 x 56 inches

178 x 142 cm



*Blue Relief Over White*

2012

Oil on canvas, two joined panels

65 x 62 ¼ inches

165 x 158 cm





*I speak of that which helps me to live, that which is good.*

—Paul Éluard (on Picasso)<sup>1</sup>

The grid is modern art's second nature. To those who believe that modernism requires forswearing all types of representation, the grid offers the added ideological convenience of being a completely human invention and, as such, wholly “unnatural.” For, as Gertrude Stein rightly observed, there is no straight line in nature. The rigid matrix of straight lines with which abstract art became infatuated early in the twentieth century and to which it recommitted itself during the 1960s and 1970s is, accordingly, the height of artifice. Yet so extensively did it become the undergirding of abstraction over the course of the decades that artists, critics, and the public at large came to think of it as an a priori framework for all two-dimensional and most three-dimensional art. After all, hadn't the old masters squared up their canvases and walls before filling them with carefully calibrated illusions of buildings, objects, and ideally proportioned people? And wasn't abstract art in a sense a Euclidean vision of beauty bare, a glimpse of the immutable and eternal perfection that results from stripping away nature's imperfections so as to reveal the “primary structures” of divine or at least transcendently Platonic mathematics?

But, as Ellsworth Kelly has always known, the rectilinear grid is but one geometric system for evenly dividing and subdividing space.<sup>2</sup> To that end, he has honed an astonishing variety of space-defining curvilinear shapes capable of unlimited permutations and proliferation, though in practice he has usually chosen to be a master of the singular, iconic form. Meanwhile, Kelly's metamorphic pictorial devices are generally derived from natural forms. Thus, for example, the rippling contour of a length of kelp becomes the pretext for mapping scalloped spatial intervals that, once elegantly cropped and isolated one from another, evolve into a vividly metamorphic vocabulary of modular forms independent of their incidence in observed reality. Freed of but never far removed from their organic origins, such pod-like units embody principles of growth and variation every bit as expansive and in many ways more dynamic than the angular fundamentals of the traditional modernist grid.

That dynamism is owed to the virtually infinite array of swelling or contracting forms that can be extrapolated from the juxtaposition of any two curves, and from the tensions exerted on the “emptiness” between them by such enclosure. Although organic phenomena like seaweed are the specific natural paradigms for some of Kelly's images, it may be more useful to think about them in engineering terms. Take, for example, the so-called leaf springs of a nineteenth-century carriage

*Two Curves*  
2012  
Oil on canvas  
55 ½ x 82 inches  
141 x 208 cm

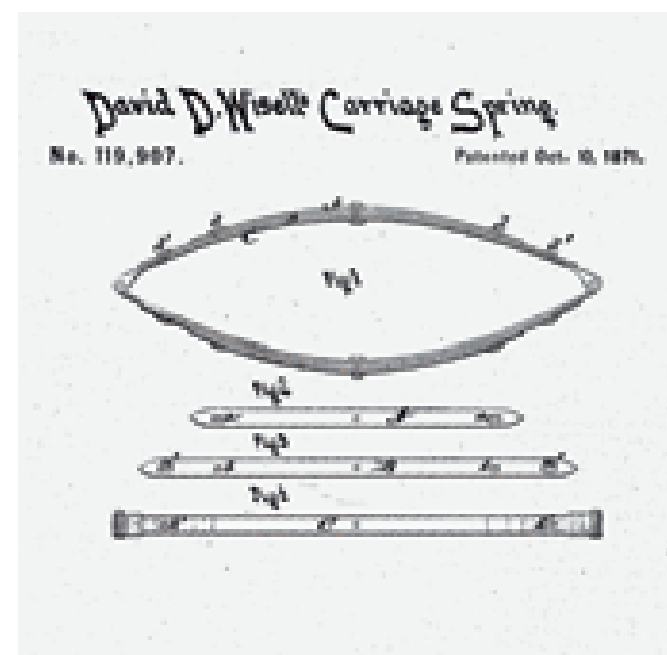


or an early-twentieth-century car. Leaf springs — as distinct from more familiar spiral springs — are made up of bowed steel bands that are laminated in increasing or decreasing lengths and degrees of curvature. When weight is applied, the bowing effect is accentuated with slight tensile variations throughout the bundle. Now imagine that such a vehicle is traveling over an even road and that the springs compress and release in unison so that they bend symmetrically. Then imagine that the road is bumpy and that the vehicle rocks back and forth, tightening and relaxing the springs asymmetrically. Now suppose that in the second instance one was able to freeze each individual band of both bundles at a certain level of tautness, extract them one by one, and match the components of the first set to the unequally sprung components of the second set like two parentheses that touch at the tips. The result would be a series of arcs and counter-arcs that flex against each other while pressurizing the area they jointly frame, cinching it in on one side and letting it bulge on the other.

Inherent in the formal tensions characteristic of curved modules of this kind is a phenomenological awareness that the relations of part to part are not locked in as they are in the rigid modules of rectilinear shapes — most of all in the equilateral square of which the modernist grid is composed — nor are their contours constant like those of a circle whose fixed center radiates its proportionally consistent circumference. Rather, the centers of the lopsided lozenges of which I am speaking are perceptually unstable. This optical as well as physical “inconstancy” largely accounts for the mesmerizing effect they have on viewers accustomed to positioning themselves in relation to paintings by projecting Vitruvian versions of their bodies’ vertical and horizontal axes onto the image before them. Neither do these lozenges share the properties of parallelograms, which are implicitly collapsible. Instead, they maintain their essentially flat but seemingly pneumatic forms through peripheral containment of a self-inflating core — through internal “push” and external “pull.” Finally, none of these modules is simply a bigger or smaller version of a standard geometric unit, as with squares, circles, and equilateral triangles.

Although each of Kelly’s eccentrically bowed shapes could be scaled up or down to suit a given situation, their initial conception and specific proportions are not owed to equations or formulas but to intuitive measurement, to the manual inscription of curves whose concavities embrace and conflate to create an utterly unique whole, to slow honing that requires total concentration on exquisite formal tolerances. I have taken the liberty of approaching Kelly’s new work in this roundabout, somewhat speculative manner in order to stress its genesis at the confluence of two realities: that of the artist’s direct experience of the world, coupled with that of his direct facture in the realms of purified yet (taking into account the influence of the first) never entirely pure form.

There is a third dimension to be considered as well — or, better said perhaps, an additional facet to the first. That is, the art-historical precedents that have fed or tantalized his imagination like liminal memories or dreams. On that score it should be noted that there is no artist currently active who has more avidly looked at the art of the past — from



Patent drawing for a leaf-spring carriage suspension

prehistoric carvings to modern and contemporary paintings — nor any who has been more candid in acknowledging his admiration for the art or artists who have inspired and provoked him. So to the references or correspondences already listed, attach the example of Constantin Brancusi, in particular his *Bird in Space* series. And treat one's mental recall and projection of those canonical works like a computer screen on which it is possible to rotate images. Silhouette Brancusi's sculpture — separating it from its base and evacuating its volume in the process — and then tip the heraldic vertical that remains thirty to forty degrees to the right, and suspend it in midair.

I am certainly not suggesting that Kelly arrived at either of the *Two Curves* of 2012 by means of such mechanical imitation, the first example being a work on canvas painted with matte-black oil pigments and the second an aluminum relief painted with subtly reflective white epoxy. I am only allowing as how a form slowly arrived at, long pondered and assiduously refined after its fundamental traits had been fully assimilated, might find confirmation in the memory of comparable forms previously seen if not studied. In this instance, Kelly's visit to Brancusi's studio in the early 1950s when the Romanian artisan/dandy still eagerly received guests — including aspiring young Americans who beat a path to his door with some frequency — anchors that memory in an encounter that took place more than half a century ago. Giving Kelly all that time to turn vestigial images over and over again in his mind's eye.

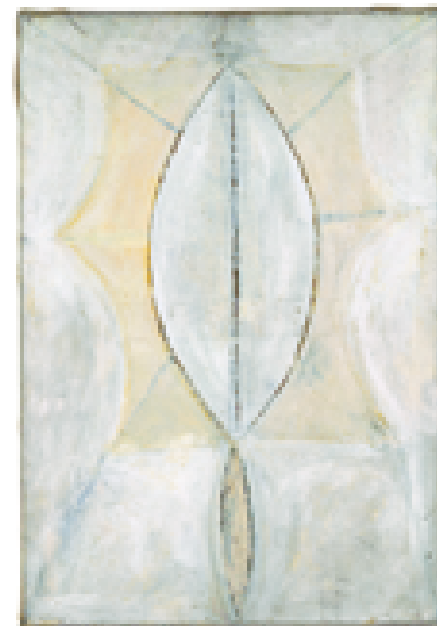
Still, the breadth of Kelly's curves far exceed that of Brancusi's, and their orientation — obliquely wall-bound and roughly chest high — alters every aspect of our experience of both versions of *Two Curves* compared to that of *Bird in Space*. Positioned as they are, they simultaneously remind us of the Vitruvian template of conventionally rectangular paintings mentioned before, and throw the viewer off kilter insofar as the tilt of the oblong work refuses to align itself with any ordinary human posture. This becomes especially apparent when standing in front of the white relief, because one can clearly catch a glimpse of one's own mirrored likeness on its surface, under most lighting conditions. But even the somewhat smaller, opaque black iteration of this shape has a physical as well as optical impact on the attentive spectator, who instinctively seeks a physical balance between his or her body and the "body" of the work, and in moving back and forth to locate that point of balance thereby renders a seemingly static plane interactively kinetic. In the presence of these two works — as in the presence of virtually all of Kelly's work — it is nigh on impossible to stand stock-still. To the contrary, one is incessantly prodded by visual cues to step back or forward, to one side or another to gain a different vantage point, establish a different rapport. And every time one adjusts one's angle of vision — which, when one comes close to the wall from the far left or the far right of the black *Two Curves*, will cause the already streamlined shape to taper radically — one is effectively seeing a new painting in a new context with every shift. This is just one of the reasons that Kelly's art strikes so many keenly observant devotees of painting as perennially, in fact eternally, fresh. Others include his deft touch — those lovingly stroked, friction-free surfaces are a demonstration of the extreme sensuousness and

virtuosity that epitomize the artist's painterly sensibility and gifts rather than a product of a detached, routinely performed procedure — and the breathtaking nuances of his distinctive palette. As to the latter, among the many ways in which Kelly's art departs from the Constructivist and Neo-Constructivist model, with which it nonetheless has significant congruities, is the deep “natural” resonance of the shades and tints of spectral color that he deploys while avoiding the simple primaries favored by more “scientific” schools of modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past decade and more, Kelly has regularly revisited forms that have had a long history in his work, and *Two Curves* belongs among them; an early predicate for it may be identified in *Mandorla* (1949), and a direct antecedent exists in *Red Curves* (1996), although its position on the wall is roughly vertical rather than approximately horizontal as in the case of *Two Curves*. So too does *Gray Curved Relief*, which recalls *White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection* (1951–53). However, there is one work in this exhibition that reaches back to the artist's own past to explore possibilities adumbrated in an early collage, *Orange Forms on Gold* (1962), but never before realized in a full-scale painting. The composition consists of a monochrome gold panel — unique in Kelly's oeuvre — along the lower edge of which two relatively compact relief elements have been attached. Each of them is a curve, cropped at both ends, which has been painted a rich tangerine orange that radiantly contrasts with its gilt surrounding. Although their contours are slightly different, both reliefs suggest abstract waves or perhaps gestural brushstrokes, as both seem to be moving from left to right and from the lower margin upwards. As such, the painting is among the lushest and at the same time most graphic that Kelly has ever made; despite its early source it constitutes a kind of breakthrough.

I say this savoring the ironies inherent in claiming that an old idea recovered by an aged artist might signal an abrupt shift in his art, an unpredicted and unpredictable re-departure in a career as long and as well documented as Kelly's. Yet the surprise of this painting fully justifies such a claim. Beyond that, the quality of mind, imagination, and hands-on invention that empowers the recognition of untested potential in an image that was previously set aside explains, as nothing else can, the astonishing capacity for “naïve” seeing and making that accounts for the perpetual self-renewal of his art. Not to mention his exceptional confidence despite an equally exceptional and exacting self-criticality. In sum, this act of auto-regeneration epitomizes the singular status and paradoxically belated preeminence of Kelly within the pantheon of American abstract artists.

After all, here is a man who has been painting since the postwar School of Paris reigned supreme and the New York School was still in its first blush. A man who moved back and forth from one artistic capital to the other, selectively engaging with both without belonging to any codified aesthetic tendency or national movement. A man given to deceptively simple forms and formats, whose unmatched focus on them has engendered paintings, reliefs, sculptures, collages, and drawings that are unmistakably his own even when they have boldly annexed territory adjacent to well-defined bodies of work by his elders — the strong color

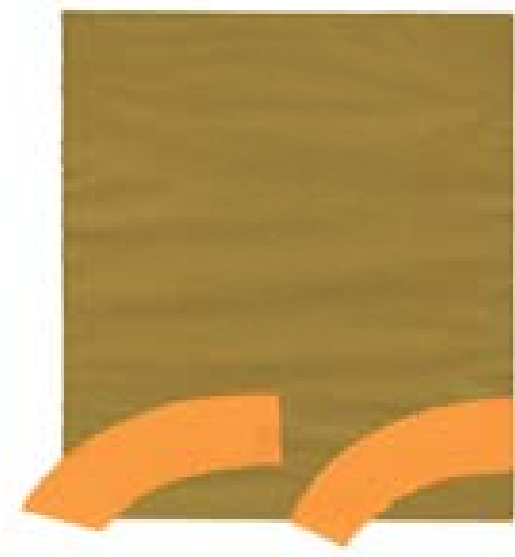


*Mandorla*  
1949  
Oil on canvas  
28 ¾ x 19 ¾ inches  
73 x 50 cm  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,  
the Doris and Donald Fisher Collection, and  
the Helen and Charles Schwab Collection

*Red Curves*  
1996  
Oil on canvas  
142 x 65 ½ inches  
361 x 166 cm  
The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at  
the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art







*Orange Forms on Gold*  
1962  
Collage  
8½ x 7⅞ inches  
22 x 20 cm  
Collection of the artist

and organic shapes of Henri Matisse, Alexander Calder, and Jean Arp, to name three — or deployed procedures being simultaneously utilized by his contemporaries or near contemporaries — the random compositions of John Cage and the cut-and-paste methods of Willem de Kooning, for example.

However, Kelly now stands alone with an unrivalled view of modernist tradition: as he found it, as he interacted with it, and as he enlarged and extended its scope himself. Yet, as has been true from the very beginning, his immediate preoccupation remains the quickening of lines, forms, and colors in the process of reconfiguring and realigning themselves. His keen eye for the subtlest nuances of this constant mutation has never failed him — or us. And so, from a distant corner of the wide horizon his view commands, he has retrieved a design that is in several respects unlike any other over whose metamorphosis he has watched. Never before have foreground elements of this proportion appeared on a background this expansive, and never before have the margins of a Kelly canvas been so active in relation to the overall field (with the two smaller panels breaking free of and extending below the bottom edge of the larger one) nor the shapes that animate them so antic (those shapes being thickened variants of the leaf-spring arcs previously discussed). In short, never before has he painted a painting like *Gold with Orange Reliefs* (2013), even though the germ of the idea for it originated over half a lifetime ago in *Orange Forms on Gold*. But he knows from experience — and we know from looking over his shoulder — that this reclamation is just a jumping-off point. Such are the prerogatives of mastery. What better way for Kelly to enter his tenth decade than poised to leap forward after a long look back?

#### NOTES

1. Translation by the author from the original French: “Je parles de ce qui m’aide à vivre, de ce qui est bien.” Paul Éluard, “Donner à voir,” *Oeuvres Complètes*, Tome 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiades/Gallimard, 1968), 940.
2. Working separately from Kelly, the painter, sculptor, and architect Tony Smith made a similar point in his own multifaceted, multifarious output. As he demonstrated, elastic topological bubble packing could just as efficiently establish visual order on what might otherwise seem to be an inchoate void. Furthermore, the imposition of such alternate pictorial devices could assume aspects of the sublime, such that an undulating and exfoliating mesh could simultaneously expand and contract space even as it bent, twisted, and warped it. Smith explored these potential mutations with hand-cut and inscribed paper models. Nowadays, computers make such manipulations child’s play.
3. Despite the unwarranted contention of some critics that Kelly shunned postwar Constructivist tendencies, the young American artist felt a spontaneous affinity for the work of the senior Belgian abstractionist Georges Vantongerloo, who gave him a painting that he has kept in his house to this day.

*Gold with Orange Reliefs*

2013

Oil on canvas and wood, three joined panels

79 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 72 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

201 x 185 cm





*White Relief Over Black*  
2012  
Oil on canvas, two joined panels  
70 x 70 inches  
178 x 178 cm



*The most pleasurable thing in the world for me is to see something and then translate how I see it.*

—Ellsworth Kelly<sup>1</sup>

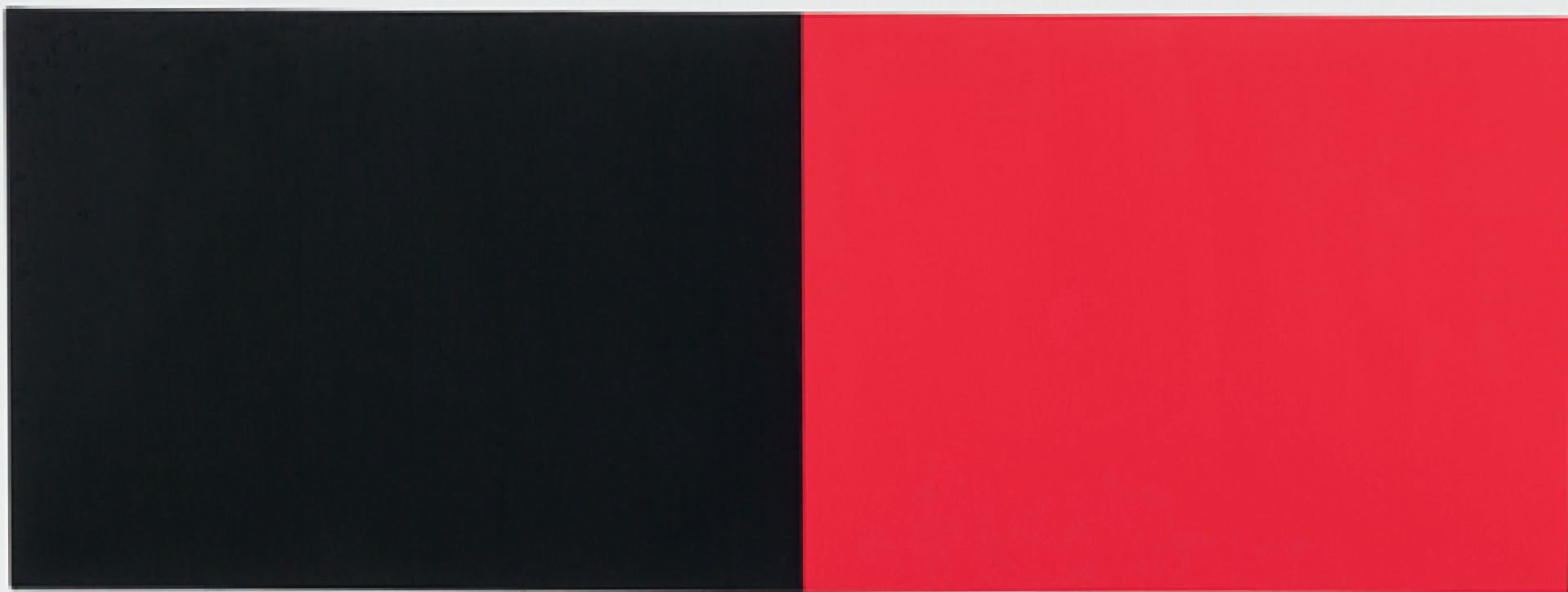
Like the experience of Ellsworth Kelly's work, the simplicity of the statement above belies a beguiling complexity. Stripped down and laid bare, much like one of his paintings, Kelly's statement tells us everything and nothing about the alchemy that has been at play in his studio for over six decades. There is nothing inaccurate about his narration — yes, the artist, always looking, finds shapes in the world that please him and from them makes his paintings. Simple. Accordingly, it would seem, when his painted panels enter the world as objects to be viewed, they are purged of all but color and shape, absent all gesture, as if pre-existing the act of creation, as if they had always existed, were discovered elsewhere and simply hung on the wall. If one knew nothing of Kelly's ideas about art or his long history of making it, it might be easier to understand these mercurial objects as ideas rather than paintings made by hand. Yet they are every inch the latter, since if his career-long commitment to painting can be said to prove anything, it is that *making* art is a viable way to be in and of the world.

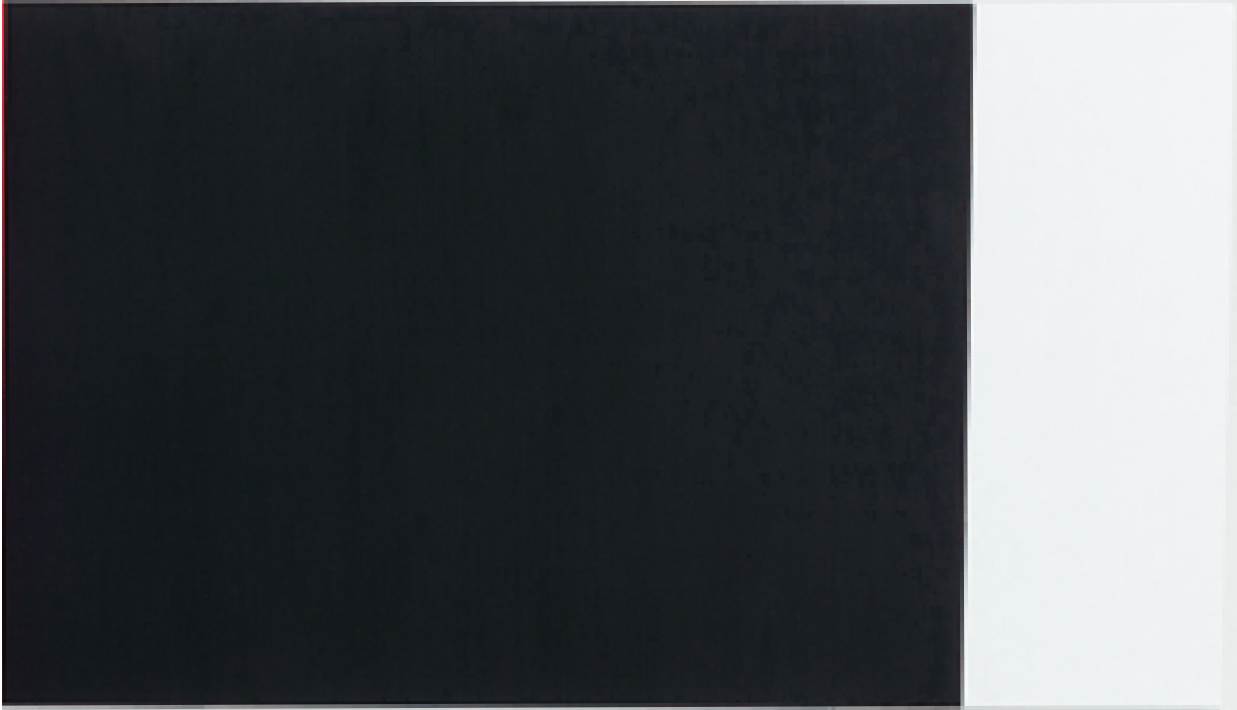
To reach that point of recognition is, however, far from simple. Take *Four Panels* (2012). This horizontal painting, measuring ten feet across, is comprised of four joined panels: two black and of the same width, one red panel one inch narrower than the black panels that squeeze it on either side, and, on the far right, a white panel roughly one quarter the width of the other three sections. So carefully and perfectly calibrated is this object relative to its own constituent parts that it is tempting to see this reliance on internal coherence as a sign of detachment from all that surrounds it. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, this painting, like many of Kelly's most recent works, can be seen as the tangible consequence of a lifetime of looking outward for direction.

Unlike his expressionist contemporaries — those active in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as those working today, and everything in between — Kelly's work never appears hard-won. His first joined panel painting, the forthrightly titled *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris* (1949), is a constructed object, much like its titular subject, made simply of oil paint applied to wood and canvas. The performance of invention played out on the public stage of the canvas, so common to painting of the period, is here completely eschewed. The work is not a readymade, but of a related order, something close to a replica, the essence of invention lying not in the act of creation but, as in so much of Kelly's work, in the successive moments of selection and translation. The result is an indexical object

*Four Panels*  
2012  
Oil on canvas, four panels  
27 x 120 inches  
69 x 305 cm









that is at once singularly compelling and indistinctly familiar, part of our shared social orbit yet standing slightly to the side, in adjacent parallel.

In a very different sense from the Minimalists, Kelly's paintings are contingent objects: not contingent on the viewer, necessarily, but on their origin point as things — often mundane things — in a world that artist and viewer share. Far from hermetic, despite their highly refined appearance, Kelly's paintings might be understood as social abstractions, related conceptually, though not aesthetically, to the materially laden decollage works of Los Angeles painter Mark Bradford (b. 1961). While Bradford works with materials quite literally torn from the fabric of the world to create material abstractions of social experience, the social embeddedness of Kelly's work derives from his famous commitment to the "already made," to moments he plucks from the world, variously translates, and presents "as is." This most basic procedure has defined and sustained his career, and is palpable at every turn. So while Kelly and Bradford could not be further removed generationally and aesthetically, their works share a basic contingency on the observed world as source, and the artists themselves share a concomitant faith in their respective abilities to derive from it a representative abstraction.

In the parlance of art in the twenty-first century, the word "abstract" is used freely and perhaps thoughtlessly to describe non-figurative work. The original Latin *abstractus*, however, literally means drawn away or detached from, a definition that is more apposite in relation to Kelly's work than the common understanding of the term, and quite helpful in coming to grips with how his work relates to and faces the world. His well-known attraction to the readymade image derives from a disdain for the contrivances of composition. Why compose or invent an image if countless pre-composed referents exist in the world, awaiting discovery? Yet this position does not imply an aversion to the figure and/or recognizable objects, or suggest that his paintings and sculptures do not in a sense represent something. Quite the contrary, in fact. Kelly's paintings may not be representational in any conventional sense, but they are quite often *representative*, a contention substantiated by the fact that for many paintings there is an accompanying story, and for each story an image that is the root of the painting. Another early painting, *Fête à Torcy* (1952), for instance, is structured by the memory of boats moored in a harbor, the perspectival view of hull after hull, interrupted by strips of blue ocean, suggesting the logic of the composition.<sup>2</sup> This painting is not abstract because it lacks a referent — the boats serve that purpose. Rather, it can be referred to properly and precisely as abstract because the painting uses as its source a form drawn away from the world of which it was once a part, and presents it as something related but separate.

More than fifty years later, Kelly's dogma of selection over invention, born out so elegantly in *Fête à Torcy* and *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, and in countless others, still holds but has evolved with time. After a life spent looking, Kelly has internalized a repertoire of found images collected over years that can be deployed and recombined at will in the studio, resulting in a process somewhat closer to the conventions of artistic invention than has been the case in decades past. Looking still



*Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*  
1949  
Oil on wood and canvas, two joined panels  
50 ½ x 19 ½ inches  
128 x 50 cm  
Collection of the artist

*Fête à Torcy*  
1952  
Oil on canvas and wood  
Two panels separated by a wood strip  
45 ½ x 38 inches  
116 x 97 cm  
Collection of the artist



holds sway over everything else — “My eyes have their own life. They tell me if a picture is working or not. I let my eyes do the work, do the judging” — but Kelly no longer requires brand new images to produce new work.<sup>3</sup> His sixty years of accumulated work has become, in effect, a self-generated world of “already makes” from which he can conceive others that stand to the side of their earlier brethren, just as those fore-runners positioned themselves at a slight but determined remove from the world of which they were once a part. This process, a natural continuation of those that governed the artist’s work in years past, produced *Four Panels*, the striking internal coherence of which is in fact contingent upon the thousands of paintings that preceded it, and the decades of looking that followed in lockstep. Independent of a specific source, though inconceivable absent years of collecting images, one might say that the painting is composed of a chain of referents derived from the memory of a lifetime spent looking and making.

#### NOTES

1. Ellsworth Kelly quoted in Madeleine Grynsztejn, “Clear-Cut: The Art of Ellsworth Kelly,” in Madeleine Grynsztejn and Julian Myers, *Ellsworth Kelly in San Francisco* (Berkeley: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the University of California Press, 2002), 9.
2. Ellsworth Kelly in conversation with the author, February 15, 2013.
3. Ibid.



*Yellow Relief Over Blue*

2012

Oil on canvas, two joined panels

70 x 60<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

178 x 154 cm



*White Curve in Relief Over Gray*  
2012  
Oil on canvas, two joined panels  
70 x 70 inches  
178 x 178 cm



*Black Relief Over White I*  
2012  
Oil on canvas, two joined panels  
70 x 60<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
178 x 155 cm



*Two Curves*  
2012  
Painted aluminum  
74<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 114 x 3 inches  
190 x 290 x 8 cm









*An artist starts from an idea and builds on it.*

—Ellsworth Kelly<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps more than other artists, Ellsworth Kelly always takes his past with him: memories of things seen and places visited, jottings captured in sketchbooks, recollections of exhibitions he has shown in, or stories about artists he has met over the years. At ninety, his memory is still sharp, like the crisp outlines of his colored forms, and he uses it to circle back to ideas he has collected over the years, retrieving those that he never developed for some reason — perhaps a concept did not intrigue him then or was not fully fleshed out, or he simply did not have time to follow through on it because another show was calling. He may have thought, “I’ll get back to that idea,” but then he never did.

A couple of years ago, while looking through drawings made about fifty years earlier, Kelly realized, “I’m not finished with these.” He came across an untitled drawing from 1962 and decided, “I have to do this!”<sup>2</sup> At the center of a sheet of paper measuring 14 x 10¾ inches appears a voluptuous, rounded black form painted in acrylic, with brushstrokes visible inside the form and pencil traces along its outer edge that show his careful adjustment of its outline. Near the top and bottom of the sheet, he drew crop marks in pencil to identify where the composition ends, perhaps in preparation for a painting. This implied perimeter tightly circumscribes the black form, leaving very little negative ground; in some areas, only slivers of the white paper remain.

Only recently did he finally decide to make works based on this drawing. The results are *Black Form I* (2011) and *Black Form II* (2012), translations of the drawing into shaped wall sculptures made of aluminum on a much larger scale, each measuring 80 x 71¾ with a depth of 4¼ inches. Kelly retained the exact shape drawn in 1962, with its curious formation of two bulbous curves that emerge from its center and end on the right-hand side. At first glance, it looks like an abstracted letter *e*, a form that Kelly has employed in the past, most likely as a play on his first initial.<sup>3</sup> As their titles suggest, *Black Form I* and *II* are painted black monochromes, but there are differences in their surface treatment. *Black Form I* has a matte texture, so its black surface remains opaque and insular against the white wall. In contrast, *Black Form II* has a glossy finish, one that functions as a dark mirror, reflecting its general surroundings and the presence of people in front of the work. The gestural brushstrokes in the initial 1962 sketch — by then Kelly had already eliminated the expressive mark from his finished paintings and sculptures — now seem to prefigure the ephemeral gestures and movements that can be captured by the reflective surface of *Black Form II*.

*Black Form II*  
2012  
Painted aluminum  
80 x 71¾ x 4¼ inches  
203 x 182 x 11 cm



The approach taken here, of looking back to prior ideas, is not, however, a recent consequence of age. Indeed, Kelly has been practicing this method since early in his career. Monochrome panel works first made in Paris in 1951 were picked up again in New York in 1965 in other rectilinear explorations and later on in shaped formations, continuing off and on until the present day. An interest in curvilinear shapes appeared in the late 1940s, reemerged several years later, and has been consistently examined throughout his career. Over the years he has continued to mine his past sketches and drawings for source material, sometimes transposing an idea as first envisioned and other times subtly or distinctly altering his original concept.

Thus, when considering Kelly's prolific output of paintings, sculptures, reliefs, drawings, prints, and commissions, the most effective method of understanding his work is not to chart a sequential, linear progression. A more fruitful approach is to think about a cross section of a tree trunk, its concentric annual rings mapping out time and holding specific information about the tree's growth — an apt metaphor for the storage of one's memories and ideas. Unlike a timeline that only moves forward chronologically, from the past to the present, a trunk's cross section starts in the present at its outer bark layer, travels back in time, growth ring by growth ring, to its origins in the center, and then moves forward again ring by ring, year by year, to the present day. The past is never over and done with; it is continually present and often still alive in the tree — a living archive. Plus, the outer shape of the pith — the central part of the trunk developed at its earliest stages — affects how the rest of the concentric rings physically take form, just as Kelly's varied shapes and ideas are continually informed by the past as he literally cuts across time.

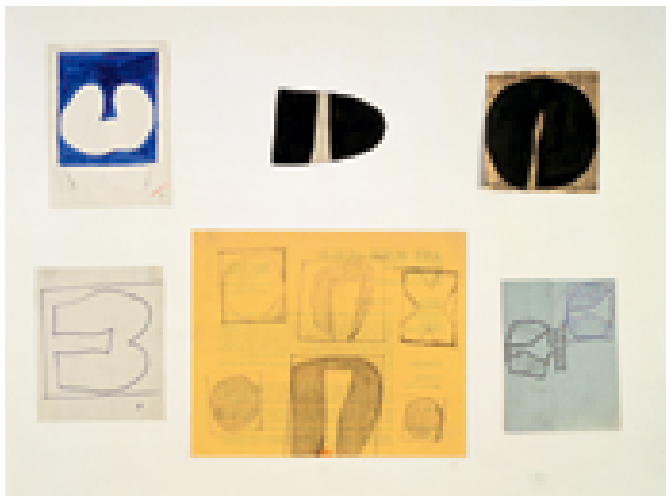
In fact, starting around 1971 Kelly undertook a project that eventually resulted in his own living archive. Diane Waldman and John Coplans had begun interviewing him in preparation for their monographs on the artist,<sup>4</sup> each requesting to see Kelly's studies and sketches.<sup>5</sup> In response, he unearthed boxes of countless small-scale sketches, collages, doodles on newspaper, magazine cutouts, and musings on other found supports such as hotel stationery, gallery opening announcements, a 1969 letter from his dealer Sidney Janis, and even a 1965 Western Union telegram from a worried mother to her forty-two-year-old son: "PHONE ME CAN'T GET YOU." All of these Kelly had been collecting since 1948 while living in France, although the majority of such jottings and sketches spanned his years living in New York City, from 1954 to 1970. With the help of an assistant, he pasted these sketches onto large sheets of mat board measuring 15 ½ x 21 inches, each with a grouping of three to six sketches based on a particular shape, idea, or theme. By the completion of this endeavor in 1973, Kelly had a collection of 217 such sheets, now known collectively as *Tablet*.<sup>6</sup>

Looking at these pages in totality is akin to looking over Kelly's shoulder, at over two decades condensed and bundled, like a cross section of a tree trunk with about twenty-five rings. They offer us gem-like moments, flashes of inspiration that never came into being and others that eventually became paintings or sculptures. The sheets reveal what



*Untitled*  
1962  
Acrylic and graphite on paper  
14 x 10 ¾ inches  
36 x 27 cm  
Private collection, Los Angeles





*Tablet 46*  
1960s  
Ink, pencil, paper mounted on mat board  
15 1/2 x 21 inches  
39 x 53 cm  
The Menil Collection, Houston. Gift of Louisa S. Sarofim in honor of James A. Elkins Jr.

Kelly was thinking about, what caught his eye, but most importantly how he looked at and took in the world. Although it was a way to assist his authors, it was also an endeavor to help his own studio practice. Prior to taking on this project, he would often leaf through this enormous collection, piece by piece, either to find an idea for a new work to be made or to find his original idea after finishing a new painting, sculpture, or relief. Often he wanted to see how his completed work might have links to earlier ideas.<sup>7</sup> As he explained, mounting the sketches on boards “was a process of ordering them so I could look back at them more easily.”<sup>8</sup>

For the most part, morphology was the overriding taxonomic principle for these pages. *Tablet 46*, for example, includes shapes dating from the 1960s that relate to the black form in the 1962 drawing. In the upper left corner, a white form appears against a blue rectangular background colored in on a small piece of white paper. Compared to the 1962 black shape, this white form has been turned ninety degrees counterclockwise. Also distinguishable from the black shape, the form is attenuated along the horizontal axis, its upright curves overtly asymmetrical, with a dimple added to its outline on the bottom. Whether this was sketched before or after his 1962 drawing is not the point, but more so Kelly’s insistence on exploring a shape in multiple variations, as seen in other sketches on this page. Immediately below this blue and white sketch is an ink line drawing in which he has turned the form another ninety degrees counterclockwise, transforming the dimple that appears above into an exaggerated, notched, V-shaped linear passage. Kelly also lengthened the curved forms into longer appendages, which he then lopped off, leaving two straight edges. But the study here that most closely resembles the 1962 drawing is the one at the upper right corner, for its stark use of monochrome black as well as its more rounded form. Kelly’s whimsy and sense of play are also evident. In this case the black shape, recognizable as a letter *e* turned ninety degrees clockwise, has been drawn onto a page from a New York telephone book that lists people with the last name Kelly.

Looking at this grouping, multiplied many more times by the rest of the pages of *Tablet*, one can witness Kelly’s constant explorations of a specific shape or idea, his different adjustments and experimentations: how he literally shapes his forms. A number of these sketches in *Tablet* were inspired by things seen, created by his non-compositional strategy of the “already-made,” a concept he first developed during his years in France.<sup>9</sup> Drawn to the empirical world, Kelly found already-made shapes in the urban or natural environment, recreating their silhouettes in his collages, sketches, paintings, and sculptures. But, a year after making the 1962 drawing, Kelly himself identified a shift in his working method — that his forms were not necessarily derived from empirical observation: “I like to work from things that I see whether they’re man-made or natural or a combination of the two. Once in awhile I work directly from something I’ve seen, *but not very often now*.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, whether or not the 1962 black form came from nature or from Kelly’s own investigations on the two-dimensional page is again not the point. What is crucial is how he finally arrives at his shapes. He has often talked about how his shapes or colors need to feel “honest” or “right,” or

even that they feel “necessary.”<sup>11</sup> For all of these qualitative judgments, he relies on vision, on sight alone, once claiming, “I don’t know what I want, my eye does.”<sup>12</sup> So let us look at one more sketch from *Tablet 46* — at what his eye wanted. At the center of the top row, a shaped cutout distinguishes itself from the rest of the rectilinear pieces of paper pasted here. Colored black and white, the form has a straight edge on the left side as it moves to the right, ending in an oblong, rounded edge. Such a curved form first engaged him in Paris in 1949,<sup>13</sup> but he did not fully explore it until returning to New York City in 1954. During his years in France, one of his central investigations was the multi-panel format incorporating monochrome color, such as his seminal *Colors for a Large Wall*<sup>14</sup> from 1951, comprised of sixty-four small square canvases, each painted a single color. As Kelly once explained, “I gave up panels and began seeing shapes in America.”<sup>15</sup>

His first painting made in New York, *Black Curves* (1954), features twin black shapes related to the cutout curve on the *Tablet* page. Emerging from a straight edge on the right, the paired and stacked forms are evenly paced as they travel from right to left, their tips finally grazing the left edge of the canvas. Attenuated and oblong, these curves appear more rectangular than the bell-shaped curve of the *Tablet* cutout. Kelly showed this painting at his first solo exhibition in New York in 1956, at the famed Betty Parsons Gallery, where he would exhibit four more times until he began showing at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1965.<sup>16</sup> This curvilinear form became a crucial shape for the artist, one that he would explore in a myriad of approaches and combinations; he even invented his own terms to define such forms: “free curves,” which do not rely on geometry, versus “radiuses,” which are curved shapes formed from segments of a circle’s circumference.<sup>17</sup> And the free curve painted here in *Black Curves* is one that took specific hold of him. He continually returned to various incarnations of this curve, rediscovering it and refining it with each new sketch and painting, which is what he did in a more fulsome way several years later in the 1962 drawing that inspired *Black Form I* and *II*.

Instead of keeping to curves that emerge from a straight edge, Kelly created in the 1962 drawing an enclosed form that is rather unusual for his inventory of shapes. It is almost as if he took the free curves from his 1954 *Black Curves* and refashioned them by first flipping the canvas horizontally, then teasing and pulling the two curves as if they were Silly Putty, then finally merging and fusing them to create a fully rounded enclosure on the left. At the time, though, he did not feel inspired to turn this 1962 sketch into an actual painting or sculpture. Looking back at this drawing, the artist recently explained, “I didn’t do it then because I didn’t feel I could do it that way. I had to wait until I was ready, until it became possible. [...] I didn’t feel it was *necessary* to do.”<sup>18</sup> At the time of this sketch and for the next few years, one of his main aesthetic goals was exploring figure-ground relationships through painted forms against a rectilinear support, as he did with the black form against the white of his paper sheet. For example, a work made the same year, *Red White*, features a related shape painted red, its free, organic form tightly enveloped by the perimeter of the white canvas.



*Black Curves*  
1954  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 26 inches  
91 x 66 cm  
Private collection

*Red White*  
1962  
Oil on canvas  
81 x 90 ¼ inches  
206 x 231 cm  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. T. B.  
Walker Foundation Fund Purchase





*White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection*  
1952–55  
Oil on wood, two panels separated by a wood strip  
64 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 47 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
165 x 122 cm  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Fractional and promised gift of Emily Rauh Pulitzer;  
Vincent D'Aquila and Harry Soviak Bequest Fund,  
and Enid A. Haupt Fund

So in 2011 and 2012, when he cut across time back to 1962, Kelly decided to cut out the form and set it directly against the wall. Again, though, such a notion of freeing the form from its ground and creating a shaped work is far from a new development. It is an ongoing pursuit for the artist that stems back to Paris in 1949 with a work titled *Wood Cutout with String I*,<sup>19</sup> and again in 1955 with his iconic *White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection*. These early shaped works are significant, as they prefigure the emergence of the shaped canvas in American art during the 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

Made from three pieces of wood painted white, *White Plaque* features Kelly's early predilection for curved forms. It is entirely enclosed, with two truncated circles joined along the horizontal axis by a third piece of wood. The work is based on a black collage Kelly had made in 1951, inspired by a shadow he had observed under a bridge in Paris and its corresponding reflection on the Seine. As with so many of his works, *White Plaque* underscores Kelly's proclivity to return to previous ideas and transform them into fresh manifestations. For what he did in 1955 was discard the black of his original collage and paint his object white instead, distancing it from his original experience of seeing the dark shadow underneath the Pont de la Tournelle in Paris. The final product is a shaped white work set against a white wall. The wall now functions as an integral part of the artwork itself, a seminal concept for the artist.<sup>21</sup> In 1951, the same year he produced his black collage, he declared that he wished to establish "a new scale of painting, a closer contact between the artist and the wall, and a new spirit of painting to accompany modern architecture."<sup>22</sup>

Like *White Plaque*, *Black Form II* embraces the wall through its cutout, shaped form. It casts its own shadows directly on the wall, thus accentuating its own material structure, distinct from Kelly's painted shapes on canvas. And, set against the wall, the subtleties of Kelly's rigorous morphology are further foregrounded. At first glance, *Black Form II* looks as if the two bulbous curves mirror each other, perfectly symmetrical across the bisecting horizontal axis. On closer inspection, one can observe the slight differences between the two. The upper curve is more evenly paced and rounded, while the lower curve has a slight angled dent in its outline along the bottom right edge. Another very subtle distinction, underscoring Kelly's exacting eye, appears where the two forms meet at the center of the shape; the top outline of the lower curve, where it meets the short vertical edge of the form at center, is a bit more swollen than the straighter bottom outline of the upper curve.

*Black Form II* well reveals how Kelly can skip across time, but it also shows how he can alter his course by adding a few surprises. Although he kept the form exactly as he drew it fifty years ago, he literally built up the work from a flat drawing into something that has density and weight. Measuring 4 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches deep, it is the one of the thickest objects Kelly has ever made. Through its literal shape and its extra depth, *Black Form II* asserts its tangible quality more forcefully against the wall. Furthermore, its glossy finish allows for the work to open up to its surroundings, producing a darkened mirror that reflects the movement of the world in front of it. Kelly's surfaces, for most of his career, have remained matte and opaque to their environs in order to emphasize his chosen shapes



and colors.<sup>23</sup> But recently he has introduced reflective surfaces into large-scale works, such as *White Curves* (2001) at the Fondation Beyeler and *White Curve* (2009) at the Art Institute of Chicago, which were inspired by his radial curves.

In contrast, *Black Form II* is a human-scaled sculpture that features this relatively new layer in Kelly’s art: a different participatory experience for his viewers, one that allows them to see themselves actually reflected within a Kelly work. It offers a distinct kind of optical experience set off not by color combinations, as in many of his works, but by mirroring the self and one’s surroundings. Through *Black Form II*, Kelly produces a contradictory tension between physical and visual perception, embodied and disembodied experience. By creating a cutout shape that even reflects its own environs, Ellsworth Kelly, with his precise eye and graceful forms, continues to shape how we see and take in the world.



*White Curve*  
2009  
Painted aluminum  
14 x 54 x ¼ feet  
4.3 x 16.5 x 0.1 meters  
The Art Institute of Chicago, commissioned by  
The Art Institute of Chicago in honor of James N.  
Wood, President and Director, 1980–2004

#### NOTES

1. Ellsworth Kelly, undated statement quoted in *Archives of American Art, A Salute to Ellsworth Kelly* (New York: Archives of American Art, 1999).
2. Ellsworth Kelly in a telephone conversation with the author, February 12, 2013.
3. For example, see his 1964–65 *Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs* in Richard H. Axsom, *The Prints of Ellsworth Kelly: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1949–1985* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1987), 51–2 (X.23–5).
4. John Coplans, *Ellsworth Kelly* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971); Diane Waldman, *Ellsworth Kelly: Drawings, Collages, Prints* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971).
5. Conversation with the artist, Spencertown, New York, July 11, 2006.
6. Kelly finally showed this collection at a 2002 exhibition curated by Yve-Alain Bois for the Drawing Center in New York, “Ellsworth Kelly: Tablet, 1948–1973.”
7. Conversation with the artist, Spencertown, New York, July 11, 2006.
8. Ibid.
9. For a seminal analysis of Kelly’s years in France and the non-compositional practices the artist developed during his French sojourn, see Yve-Alain Bois, “Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in Its Many Guises,” in Bois, Jack Cowart, and Alfred Pacquement, *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992).
10. Kelly continues, “A lot of the earlier pictures were paintings of things I’d seen, like a window, or a fragment of a piece of architecture, or someone’s legs; or sometimes the space between things, or just how the shadows of an object would look. The things I’m interested in have always been there.” Quoted in the artist’s first published interview, Henry Geldzahler, “An Interview with Ellsworth Kelly,” in *Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings by Ellsworth Kelly* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 1963), n.p. Reprinted in *Art International* 8, no. 1 (February 1964): 47–8; italics added.
11. “My paintings are about the *honesty* of vision, a presentation as close to reality as I can get.” Ellsworth Kelly in conversation with the author, Spencertown, New York, August 2, 2001; italics added.
12. Ellsworth Kelly in conversation with the author, Spencertown, New York, August 2, 2001.
13. See his 1949 painting *Kilometer Marker*, in Bois 1992, cat. 27, pl. 22; and Diane Waldman, ed., *Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1996), pl. 3.
14. See Bois 1992, cat. 75, pl. 74; and Waldman, ed., 1996, pl. 16.
15. Ellsworth Kelly in conversation with the author, Spencertown, New York, August 2, 2001.
16. For a detailed exhibition history, see Josette Lamoureux, “Exhibition History and Bibliography,” in Waldman, ed., 1996, 320–30.
17. Ellsworth Kelly in conversation with the author, Spencertown, New York, August 2, 2001.
18. Ellsworth Kelly in a telephone conversation with the author, February 27, 2013; italics added.
19. See Bois 1992, cat. 33, pl. 33.; and Patterson Sims and Emily Rauh Pulitzer, *Ellsworth Kelly: Sculpture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art), cat. 2, 40–1.
20. Kelly showed *White Plaque* at the significant exhibition “The Art of the Real” mounted by the Museum of Modern Art in 1968; E. C. Goossen, the exhibition’s curator and an early supporter of Kelly’s art, referred to this work by asserting that Kelly was “responsible for what

was probably the first ‘shaped canvas’ that can be directly related to subsequent developments.”

Goossen, *The Art of the Real* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 8.

21. Kelly shared his burgeoning concept with John Cage, whom he had met in June 1949 and who was staying with Merce Cunningham at the same hotel as Kelly in Paris, the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Cage visited Kelly’s studio at the hotel and admired Kelly’s reliefs. In a letter to Cage dated September 4, 1950, Kelly wrote, “I am not interested in painting as it has been accepted for so long — to hang on the walls of houses as pictures. To hell with pictures — they should *be* the wall — even better — on the outside wall — of large buildings. Or stood up outside as billboards or a kind of modern icon.” Quoted in Nathalie Brunet, “Chronology,” in Bois 1992, 187–8.

22. Kelly stated the above in his 1951 application for a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial grant offered to those working in the fields of the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the arts. He hoped the scholarship would furnish him with the money to publish a book project, “Line Form Color,” which he had begun that spring. Kelly, however, was not granted the fellowship. Quoted from his original application form, Ellsworth Kelly archives, Spencertown, New York. Also quoted in Clare Bell, “At Play with Vision: Ellsworth Kelly’s ‘Line, Form and Color,’” in Waldman, ed., 1996, 66, n. 3. See also the publication Ellsworth Kelly, *Line Form Color* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 1999).

23. In 1970, with *Mirrored Concorde*, Kelly briefly experimented with mirrored surfaces in sculpture. See Sims and Pulitzer, cat. 53, 100.



*Ellsworth Kelly at Ninety* is published to accompany an exhibition at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 W 22nd Street, 526 W 22nd Street, and 523 W 24th Street, New York, from May 11 through June 29, 2013.

This book records an exhibition of fourteen new paintings and two new sculptures by Ellsworth Kelly, who celebrates his ninetieth birthday while the show is on view. Few artists reach this milestone, even fewer while continuing to make great work. Thank you Ellsworth for the opportunity to present this new work, which proves once again what an exceptional artist you are, and happy birthday!

It is truly a team effort to produce an exhibition and a publication like this one, and I am very lucky to have had many remarkable people working on this project.

I would like to thank Donna Carlucci, Nick Walters, and Joe Yetto at the Kelly studio for their constant support. They are wonderful to work with and always willing to go beyond the call of duty. Eva Walters deserves special recognition for the skill with which she attends to the many details that ensure our successful collaboration with the studio.

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—MM

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Frontispiece: Ellsworth Kelly in his studio, Spencertown, NY, March 12, 2013

Photograph by Jack Shear